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DISASTER AND POETRY

A Study of James Thomson (B. V.)

BY JEANNETTE MARKS

POETRY takes both the foot of the tight-rope walker and an astronomer's eye for the stars,—and men grow dizzy. The question is whether the type of man who is perfectly equipped to enjoy life would write poetry? Whether it is not very often—if not always—suffering or disease or disaster which brings to him the will to create? Is there not in the very act of creation a setting aside of that greater quality which is life itself? Will not the arts mark for their own that man or women upon whom meditation, hesitation, even crippling, has laid its pause and its silence? One greater than James Thomson wrote:

Thence comes it that my name receives a brand,
And almost thence my nature is subdued
To what it works in, like the dyer's hand.

It is possible that in the assumption that a man's work is greater than himself—that is, that art is of more value than life itself—there is some emphasis which leads to disease, and something mawkish, a little flabby, bandying, as this assumption does, the words "divine," "inspiration," "genius."

Of the custodian values of poetry to society none is greater than the truth. Any other emphasis results either in sentimentalizing life or in the arrival of Mrs. Grundy ready to go into action, her awe-inspiring Victorian bonnet tied firmly under her plump and respectable chin. It was the shadow of this bonnet thrown across his love for beauty—his poetry—which made Swinburne, the bright-haired, dance and chatter and spout insult and outrage. It is a shadow hard for any poet, any lover of truth and beauty, to endure. Yet, indeed, the very conditions which have created the best in the arts, have made Mrs. Grundy possible.

It is only when men have in their development achieved some leisure that she walks in. Against all the laws of material progress, art does not spring out of want. It takes its rise in margins of energy and leisure, for it is spiritual and its law the reverse of that which is material. Men have to possess, grow a little ennuye with their possession, consider, and then and then only, when the Joys of gross material wealth are already lessening, does art come into its own.

James Thomson frequently refers to himself as a cynic. Yet he has social imagination that might have led him on to considerable power. Nevertheless Thomson never set himself wholeheartedly to any reform, political, social, moral. Even where he gives us a social document, as, for example, in *Low Life*, it is somehow not of value. Only in his greatest poem, *The City of Dreadful Night*, do we have material power. Where his feeling is valuable it is because it is a matter of experience and not of theory. Poets are not only the "unacknowledged legislators of the world," they are also the greatest sociologists. As a rule leaders in a cause lack ability to see two sides. But Thomson's inability to give himself to a cause might be intellectual honesty, or again it might be lack of moral conviction. Which? Some sense of futility there was about him. Was this sense that of struggling against his own weakness or against fate?

Social belief—faith in the value of human life and human endeavor—goes deeper than habit, for it has the power to shape habit. Some enervation there was at work in the very engine room of Thomson's thinking. In his work and that of other poets at that time, I think, it was a form of sentimentalism, that had misled into pessimism,—all the silly, shallow, tinselly, egotistical hopes which when science took them away their owners cried out for like spoiled children and would not be comforted. This curious attitude toward science can be seen in Thomson's *Naked Goddess*.

Man suffers from the assumptions of his own egotism. He assumes that the universe is made for him and then because he cannot have all he wants, he sets up the demon of pessimism for himself and others. Human nature is discontented often because it longs to possess everything for all time, and attempts to put eternity in its pocket. This is but one expression of the grasping or greedy character of egotism to which all too often the word "spiritual" is ap-

plied. Any man with any tragic experience whatsoever judging life solely or largely by his personal knowledge of it is bound to be a pessimist. James Thomson writes in *Essays and Phantasies*: "Having made us take part in this poor puzzling game of life, she has taken care that all the rules shall be unfavorable to us: the cards are marked, the dice are loaded, we are always swindled." But this assigns conscious intention to that which is without intention. In a healthy creature the mere organic possession of life is not a little gift, not a little pleasure. Why all this railing by these over-developed egotists,—not only these individual tragedies like this of James Thomson, but all these rancorous disillusioned figures, for example, of Conrad's? A patient study of science could tell a man something about those pleasures which he may legitimately expect,—and about the inevitable! One can believe in God without deciding what it is God shall do for one. There is precisely nothing of that fine, steady, healthful spirit of inquiry, science has brought us, that courageous spirit which can set aside the whimperings of egotism and face facts. This is the trouble with narrow expressions of religion, such as the faith of the Irvingites, the faith of Thomson's mother and therefore of inescapable influence upon Thomson. They plot out all the inches of heaven and decide upon the unknown and the unknowable.

Henry Salt's Biography starts with the preconceived idea that Thomson's pessimism is the all-dominant note of his life and his work. To this end all information is bent. By actual count there are more poems expressing joy than pessimism. The distinction is a distinction in force and not a numerical difference. The strongest of his poems—those alone which matter very much to posterity—are pessimistic. The deep-seatedness of this attitude towards life is incontrovertible but it is not without contradiction. It is possible to apply to Thomson's pessimism the word "pathological." But if this is done, it should be remembered that there are types of optimism as pathological, due to the quick-burning of disease, as for example, the buoyant hopefulness created by tuberculosis. The causes for Thomson's pessimism were several: his inheritance, sorrow which came to him in the loss of his love, physical and mental suffering, a generous and sensitive imagination which saw the bitter lot of multitudes of the unfortunate, constant anxiety about

his own financial condition, and defective energy which broke down whenever too great strain was put upon it.

He valued his own intellectual liberty greatly. More than once bitter and true is the penetration of his wit as, for example, in his essay on *The Speedy Extinction of Evil and Misery*. Fearless he is, too. "Christianity," he writes, "was founded by the poor Jew Jesus (not at all the same person as our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, with whom he has been commonly and stupidly confounded, but indeed an immensely better character than the said Lord and Savior)." So in a phrase, does he brush aside the accretions of men's selfishness, vanity and cowardice. He will attack the most powerful in the world of art with an amiable terocity that leaves nothing to be desired, at least in courage, and which very often tells the truth. Thomson places *The Lotus Eaters* as the best work "of our weak and exquisite Tennyson." This is fearless criticism with a grain of truth in it. With no less fearlessness does he tilt at Longfellow:

The sublime *Excelsior* is very popular at present, but I doubt whether any man (soft curates, Sunday school teachers, and tea meeting muffs who think beer and tobacco certain perdition, excepted) ever read the adventures of its lofty hero without ejaculating, "The ineffable ass! The infernal idiot!"

Although James Thomson thinks along his own lines, he is, too, thoroughly British in his sharing of insular prejudices: he refers to one idea of Emerson's as "sheer vulgar Yankee-republican." His attitude towards Americans—based on a few months spent in the wilds of Colorado—is the usual one. Beginning with the flaying of our vulgarity, he follows in the footsteps of Dickens, Matthew Arnold, and our other appreciative guests who unlike Bryce, who knew his America before he wrote about it, come determined to find us English because a handful of brave and splendid Englishmen came here in the early seventeenth century. Finding us a vast and bewildering conglomerate of an age in social geology whose forces they do not understand, they call names rudely and take their British playthings and go home like the pampered pets of civilization they have been.

Yet—probably for want of a balance wheel—most of Thomson's power came to nothing. In his personal life he rejected the friendship of the one man who stabilized him, who kept his forces in any sense directed and ordered. To

have cast aside such a friend as Charles Bradlaugh as Thomson did, after so many years of friendship, was indeed neurotic folly of the worst order. Nothing could so point to his central instability as the fact of this deed. In a cause or a friendship that was his, Bradlaugh was a man of the highest integrity, of the greatest generosity, of absolute fearlessness. Even his enemies had to admit the fine quality of Bradlaugh. The only thing which can be said for Thomson is that he was so ill that he knew not what he did,—and that already he had turned his face towards death.

Personal magnetism must not be confused with Thomson's position as an artist. There can be no question but that he had in distinguished measure personal attraction, a sort of hypnotic influence over all human beings who came into contact with him. It is interesting to see the way in which this legend of James Thomson has been woven: the man of genius who has done so much great work that was unappreciated. The legend is due to the magnetism of his lovable personality, the loving indiscrimination of his editors and biographers, and the tragedy of his own life. He did three poems of the second or third rank: *In the Room*, *The City of Dreadful Night*, *Insomnia*. A few of England's best like Meredith, Rossetti and George Eliot, found power in this poetry, and a few of the world's best men and women always will, however pitifully unfulfilled that power may be. Nevertheless I feel that this lure of his personality has done more than anything else to invalidate the work of contemporary criticism of Thomson.

Thomson was unspoiled by the attention of his friends. There was nothing that they could do which could have made him conceited or egotistical. Of that saturnalia for position, that "scalping" of every person or opportunity within reach of the literary tomahawk, he would have nothing to do. Methodical in his habits, orderly by nature, hard-working, only the inroads of his disease could destroy his sturdy efficiency. His education was self-acquired and acquired in the face of constant poverty and in darkest drudgery. He was not in a hurry to rush into print. This may have been due to his lack of business instinct, but it was more probably the result of his innate modesty. Modesty is one of the qualities which is most lovable in James Thomson. He possessed it with such grace, such a sense of humor,

humor that did not desert him even in his most abject moments:

Once in a saintly passion
I cried with desperate grief,
O Lord, my heart is black with guile,
Of sinners I am chief.
Then stooped my guardian angel
And whispered from behind,
"Vanity, my little man,
You're nothing of the kind."

He has a certain natural gaiety and sweetness that never turned acrid. When there was opportunity, his capacity for enjoyment was very great. Even in 1881 within a year of his death, on the very margins of his fighting powers and the dark end, his sense of humor is still bubbling in a letter written to his sister-in-law Mrs. John Thomson: "I quietly take things as they come, and quietly let things go as they go, fortifying myself with that saying of the philosopher that it matters not in this vale of tears whether we wipe our eyes with a silk or cotton handkerchief, or blink through tortoise-shell or gold-rimmed glasses." Rarely has such humor been coupled with so much sympathy for human suffering, so keen a sense of the pitilessness of human fate, so awful and inevitable personal anguish so bravely born.

Intemperance first becomes evident in his life in 1855. He was then twenty-one years old and the fourteen-year-old Matilda Weller had been dead three years. A secondary or auxiliary disease may have been the ingrowing disease of self-distrust which pressed upon him nervously until his balance tipped still further. Indeed this self-distrust may have been one factor in his modesty. Who shall say where the one begins and the other ends? . . . His mother was a neurotic *religieuse* of the Non-Conformist type. The instability that goes with this form of religious experience is too well known to demand analysis. The background of his home life was superstition, disease, poverty, intemperance. Thomson recognized in himself a tendency to morbid religious emotions. It was the loss of his religious faith about 1857 which, as much as anything else, settled upon him the constitutional melancholy from which he never recovered. From an "Irvingite" mother to Charles Bradlaugh the atheist is indeed a swing of the pendulum! Sorry material is the broken record we have of his increasing ill-health, of his "attacks"; of the sunstroke he suffered

while doing journalistic work in Spain (during that prostration, part of *The City of Dreadful Night* was worked out); pitiful records from time to time of his selling the books from his small library in order to get money for food; of "moods" in which he knew all too well that common sense was about to be thrown; of changes of employment and of the instability of his habits; accounts of his intemperance and lack of self-control; evidences of the oncoming of his attacks; and then the neural explosion,—and one appalling outbreak with its insult to his friends, the Barrs, who would so gladly have forgiven him. His letter to the Barrs written in April—he died the first week in June, 1882,—shows the central dignity of Thomson with a pathos no words can describe.

To the psychopathologist these data are all familiar,—the old, old story of disaster—and there is no need to repeat them in their heart-breaking detail. Men do not talk about a human being who has tuberculosis as if he had failings. He has a disease and they know it. The dipsomaniac has a disease and they should know it. Thomson's character was naturally firm, naturally methodical, naturally constant to others as well as to himself. If through his inheritance there was some enervation undermining the strength of his life and so that of his poetry and prose, too, it is important that it should be understood. Something of the same weakening in his social credo was, I believe, at work also in his love and, through its loss, his experience of sorrow. This sorrow is more than youth's classic despair at death,—its shudder as the dark shadow falls across its path. This shudder is something more than that ignorance of youth which knows nothing of the law of gravity the ripened apple follows when it falls, but sees only a separation between life and death which does not exist. Somehow that energy which, under usual or normal circumstances acts as a converter, he lacked. The study of his love for Matilda Weller from any point of view is incredibly difficult—forbidden in the minds of many—yet unavoidable, for it is a shaping power almost from first to last in his life. In a sense this problem must remain a battleground for all lovers or students of James Thomson, with hostile camps of realists and symbolists.

It is in the love season that there is seen the best of another human being. The story of the Phoenix which later gets up out of the ashes of disillusionment is another story. But, for

human comfort, it is often more beautiful. In this resurrection—this Easter Day for all great loves—are the triumphs of hard idealism. One has the right to wonder what the history of James Thomson in this emotional cycle would have been, for out of such experience is wrought the dream which endures. It is all too evident that intellectually, socially, personally, he had not in him those sinews which make for lasting dreams. The period of passion is a period of untried idealism. The leverage of this idealism is tremendous. So is the inevitable blow of disillusionment tremendous. It is the moment which tests the moral centering of a human being as no other moment in life. What would that moment have done to or for James Thomson? These are the questions which Meredith partly ignored and partly recognized when he wrote after Thomson's death: "He probably had, as most of us have had, his heavy suffering on the soft side. But he inherited the tendency to the things which slew him. And it is my opinion that, in consideration of his high and singularly elective mind, he might have worked clear of it to throw it off, if circumstances had been smoother and brighter about him. For thus he would have been saved from drudgery, have had time to labor at conceptions that needed time for the naturing and definition even before the evolvment of them. He would have had what was also much needed in his case, a more spacious home, a more companioned life, more than merely visiting friends, good and true to him though they were. A domestic centre of any gracious kind would have sheathed his over-active, sensational imaginativeness, to give it rest, and enable him to feel the delight of drawing it forth bright and keen of edge." These are the best and wisest words that have been written about James Thomson, yet I cannot agree with them.

The outlook for dipsomania is not good,—and his was a genuine case of dipsomania, an entailment from his father. If Matilda Weller had lived, would not the struggle have involved two rather than setting free one? It is not unwelcome to the human heart, whether English or American or Italian or of whatsoever nationality, to believe in these eternal loves however unfounded on experience, fact, or vision they may be. It should be remembered here, though, that Thomson failed invariably in every one of his responsibilities. The way in which his mind returns to Matilda as life

goes on is just the psychology of the man dying in the desert of thirst, in his eyes the mirage of a remembered oasis. Matilda was fourteen when she died and Thomson was eighteen. The nature and the symbol of sorrow in Thomson's poetry assuredly have the quality of an *idée fixe* with its touch of the abnormal. Even in his very pseudonym "B. V." (Bysshe Vanolis), "Bysshe" commemorates Shelley and "Vanolis" Novalis the German lyric poet, Friedrich von Hardenburg, who lost his beloved, also named Matilda. One feels that this carefully maintained devotion after death has in it the quality of imitation and that it is shot through not with fact and experience and a great vision of love as part of life but with sentimentality. There is some delegated emotion here not wholly his own.

This quality of imitation is felt in James Thomson's art. His early poetry shows no approach, no traits of emotion, no thought different from any other young poet adequately gifted with sensuous perceptions. His Juvenilia in essays and verse might be entitled "Echoes from Swift, Keats, Shelley, Arnold, Rossetti, and Tennyson." He was a man thirty years old when he wrote some of this. It is totally without distinction. One reads on and on wearily wondering what much of it is about; nothing clear-etched; nothing firm,—just "poetry" that beats its varying rhythms with the help of trite phrases, tedious sentimentality, blurred meanings. In the lesser poems the only memorable passages are those which have the strength of experience. It is as if at once his verse becomes better where suffering cuts into him and mixes with him the only originality he possesses. As suffering creates his greatness, fustian phrases and *cliché* words drop away. It is difficult to analyze why all this seems so feeble. It is not alone that it is unforgivably sentimental but it seems so without point. There is a kind of wide-mouthed emptiness of meaning about many of the poems that makes one feel alcohol already at work blurring thought and outlines of form, nevertheless boisterously congratulating itself on the achievement of great work. This is the old, old trick of over-stimulation,—of weakness. It is the misfortune of the imitative tendency that it is altogether too likely to retain the weakness rather than the strength of that which it follows, for strength is largely self-made.

Thomson tells us that the only true or inspired poetry is always from within, not from without,—that is, a good

poem cannot be created with the mind alone. "Ah then," we say, "so he knew that!" Yes, he knew that,—he knew several of the inmost secrets of great creative work. In his essay on *Whitman* he wrote: "To speak in literature with the perfect rectitude and *insouciance* of the movements of animals, and the unimpeachableness of the sentiment of trees in the woods and grass by the roadside, is the flawless triumph of art." But this was never true of Thomson's poetry except where, as in the case of *The City of Dreadful Night*, he paid his very life for what was produced. He sins so often as an artist. The words he uses are sometimes as ludicrous as buttons sewed on in wrong places. The unusual word in Thomson seldom becomes part of the whole garment. There is a fine verbal simplicity about good poetry. Yet Thomson seeks trophies of the erudite or the obsolete. There is nothing applied externally in great poetry to its fabric woven in one piece from heart and mind. A word is precious because of its human value. It can have no other value. In science, as service; in common speech, as community of interest; in art, as revelation and healing. The instant a word is so used that it robs its context of *human* value, that instant there is loss of power. Indeed his "error" as artist goes deeper than the attachment of button trophies to the garment of his work. For me the great error of even his greatest work lies in a certain point of view, for in the very instance of his most impressive poem, *The City of Dreadful Night*, I detect the quality of one who sees life as an intellectually gifted and tragically condemned member of the Salvation Army might see it, rather than as pure poet.

Is there some touch of the vicious quality—that is, that which is against art—of sentimentalized gospel hymns in James Thomson's poetry? There is much to be said for caste and class in the leadership of the arts. People *will* choose what they understand. And if to the majority a sentimental hymnology appeals, then that will be the language of its current poetry. Thomson's only American biographer, Edward Meeker, speaks of the "sorry affairs the present pays for and the future forgets." The number of these "affairs," certainly, is lessened in a society whose emphasis has progressed at least a little beyond the commercial. In a country with a population so mixed as ours, leadership—leadership for the arts at least—may be "safest"

with privilege. It is possible its dominion would not have the promise of being so mighty. What a nation whose hero is Abraham Lincoln can do for poetry is on the way to be revealed. In our poetry a few certainties emerge; a gait that is free; a step swifter; breathing deep, strong, noisy; energy that breaks away from all convention of a social caste system; a disposition to tattoo the face of poetry under the delusion—common it would seem to civilization as well as barbarism—that disfigurement, whether in freakish line or high heel, is beauty; methodistical joy shouting with abandon about vast forces, social, geographical, spiritual—in short a chorus of Western voices all too often sensitive to the weak gentilities of left-over British Victorians and to Mrs. Grundy. It is conceivable that out of a good and universally dispensed education great results will come to poetry even under the unsafe leadership of an American democracy still unwilling to acknowledge "caste"!

Assuredly in England leadership in the arts has been safest with privilege. This becomes evident in the study of James Thomson, not because it educates the individual, but rather because in the arts as a whole it inhibits certain tendencies and eliminates individualism. To think brought James Thomson despair. For consolation all too often he has nothing but some Cockney toys of vulgar pleasure—and instinctively the American despises the Cockney as a creature deprived of freedom and grievously disfigured by the social and economic pressure of civilization in speech, gait and look. Again and again England's social system has constricted art to the figure of this Cockney, and only "privilege" dominant has saved her poetry from widespread impairment. Repeatedly has the Cockney limitation stamped itself on poetry and prose; the worst that Keats, Charles Lamb, Leigh Hunt did; some of the best and the worst that James Thomson did. No doubt it was Thomson's training and not his personality which made his offences possible. Like Cockney wit, something of what he writes has all too often the taint of cheap silliness. This is not necessarily the emanation of a single personality though it is signed "B. V." This is the composite, a little degraded personality, of a whole class of people, its youth gone, conscious of a compromised spiritual rectitude, toying with deep things which youth, romance, love, a new world, would approach in all seriousness. Here in this attitude is the

constitution of death not youth. The days of Elizabeth are gone. The days of Wordsworth are passed. The torch is in other hands. Its flame travels westward still, with the sound of many feet seeking a new and better world.

There are several things no spirited human being wishes to share with others: his love, his charities, his sins. If he would withhold the first and the last, let him not write poetry. Though no biography of him exist or ever exist, men will know all they need to know of what has been nearest to him and weakest in him. Poetry is always an "intimate" moment. How could it be otherwise? It therefore reveals not only the most intimate beauty of the human heart and its strength: it shows also its weaknesses and its deformities. . . . Is it accident or a sort of composite significance of all his work that so often makes a poet known chiefly by one poem? I feel that it is composite significance. In his greatest poems, *In The Room* (1867-8), *The City of Dreadful Night* (1870-74) and *Insomnia* (March, 1882) James Thomson works free from imitation of anyone. No, even at this instant of thinking about *The City of Dreadful Night* my eyes see the form and my ears hear the cadence of the stanzas of Tennyson's *The Two Voices*. I find nothing else of James Thomson's equal to *The City of Dreadful Night* in power of thought; in impressive imagery dull or flashing but always full of doom; and in sustained firmness of form. *Insomnia* touches it; *In The Room* is kin to it; but no other poem of Thomson's equals it. His master poem may have shocked his own period,—no doubt it did shock Mrs. Grundy. But there is nothing in it that would shock the most sensitive today. There is much in it that is heart-breaking in its revelation of the suffering of another human being. And in it are lines of rarely equalled beauty such as "The mighty marching and the golden burning:" and "That one best sleep which never wakes again."

In respect of its art it is a bigger poem than Tennyson's *Two Voices*. Great poetry works outward from self. The outward movement of Tennyson's *Two Voices* is imperceptible; its self-analysis holds it in bondage. Argumentation does not make verse. But the supreme power of Thomson's *City of Dreadful Night* lies in the fact that personal tragedy sets the poet free. And his line does indeed "march under a banner." But that "banner" is pessimism, sinister destiny, what you will:

I find no hint throughout the universe
Of good or ill, of blessing or of curse;
I find alone Necessity Supreme;
With infinite Mystery, abysmal, dark,
Unlighted ever by the faintest spark
For us the flitting shadows of a dream.

Yet what is this echo of a cadence heard elsewhere, of a conflict witnessed, not the same but similar; and the suggestion of that last line of Thomson's stanza somehow familiar before Thomson wrote it? Here is the answer in Tennyson's *Two Voices*:

Moreover, something is or seems,
That touches me with mystic gleams,
Like glimpses of forgotten dreams.

Of something felt, like something here;
Of something done, I know not where;
Such as no language may declare.

Even in this only citadel of his greatest poem—the sole creation we could hope to call wholly and adequately his own—there is too close analogy between intellectual inquiry and outward form to leave us any choice but still to place Thomson among the imitative. The correspondence between certain portions of *The City of Dreadful Night* and Tennyson's *Two Voices* is not merely that of terza rima, of a similar subject, of figures much alike. The correspondence goes deeper than that: it is dependence,—the dependence of James Thomson on Alfred Tennyson. I think Thomson felt, as many have felt, the inner weakness of *The Two Voices*. Yet he had neither the intellectual nor the spiritual strength to travel further than Tennyson. And setting his goal beyond that of Tennyson and failing to reach it, the whole poem becomes enfeebled by failure.

The City of Dreadful Night was written during periods of mental suffering but the poet was not friendless. Thomson himself said that it "was the outcome of a good deal of sleepless hypochondria suffered at various periods." There is difference of opinion regarding the influence of opium on this poem. Some writers have spoken of Thomson as an habitual opium-eater. This is assuredly a mistake. I find evidence of only occasional opium-taking in his poetry, but almost continuous evidence of the effects of alcoholism. His personal history—now locked up in the diaries in the possession of Percy J. Dobell (the oldest son of Bertram Dobell)—would, I think, reveal evidence of more constant re-

course to opium, probably in the form of laudanum, during the years when he was writing *The City of Dreadful Night*. In his sleepless periods he had found alcohol alone—he had gone too far with that by this time—would not serve his purposes of stupefaction, and he felt himself driven, as many another has, to the increased use of opium, which was then a common remedy given after an attack of alcoholism.

Several are the evidences of opium-taking in this great poem. That sense not only of the dragging foot of misery but of the endlessness of time is one of the mental stigmata of opium addiction:

The City is of Night, but not of sleep;

There sweet sleep is not for the weary brain;

The pitiless hours like years and ages creep,

A night seems termless hell. This dreadful strain

Of thought and consciousness which never ceases,

Or which some moments' stupor but increases,

This, worse than woe, makes wretches there insane.

To the diseased experience of the endlessness of time this poem is one long tragic tribute. Some allowance must, of course, be made for the effect upon so sensitive an imagination of DeQuincey's *Suspira de Profundis*. But the phantasmagoria of *Insomnia* as of the *City* is partly opium I am sure: all these monstrous shadowy forms, the rigor, the tremblings, the timelessness of time, the jarring, the cramped respiration, the chills, the sweat, the badly laboring heart, the thoughts of self-destruction, the consciousness of health lost. The thought of self-destruction haunted Thomson over many a long year yet he resisted it to the last. Shuddering nerves there are in his work. Nowhere do we get that temptation to kill himself more strongly given than *In the Room*. And nowhere is his essential sanity so evident in light, clear touch.

The service of such poems as these greatest poems of James Thomson's is not to be calculated in terms of health and joy but in terms of illness and sorrow. It is plain that I differ with Meredith—than with whom there is no writer of modern times I would rather agree—for I think that tragic experience was the creative reagent in James Thomson's case and that without it he would have written no great poetry. It was tragedy reagent that kept him from sinking into the fat lethargies of English sentimental poetry. Had destiny touched him with a gentler hand he would have sought in self-expression one of two extremes, shallow

and optimistic sentimentality or mordant satire,—both moods disturbed reflexes of what is the truth. The great work—and there can be no question but that *The City of Dreadful Night* has the quality of greatness—that Thomson did was hewn out of the experience of his own sorrow. This is a clear case of where through the reagency of tragedy disaster has *made* poetry. One has only to study the dates of Thomson's poems to see at work in them—for Thomson—the master shaping hand of his tragedy. His habits were destroying him but they were shaping his poetry into a terrible graven image of human sorrow like unto Thomson's own. The poems he wrote while he had a fair degree of health and happiness have no value. I am drawing no conclusions. I am merely stating facts.

In the slow photography of a sick human soul inevitably certain things record themselves which are unexpected. The value of such studies as these lies not in their conclusions—if it were possible to make any—but in open-minded consideration of what for the present admits of no conclusion. Forms of insanity have always stood in some relation of value to society: the epileptic leader, prophecy and revelation. Disease? We battle against it and thereby we grow. Is it, too, productive of energy? In some all too human moods one is tempted to say that disease can do nothing but destroy, make hideous, bring death. But as one looks at nature this is seen not to be so. Take the pine cone gall so common to the willow-tree. I see it hanging on the lake margins of my home, mysteriously beautiful in its gray-green fruit, one soft exfoliating leaf overlapping the other till all are formed into the shape of the perfected pine cone but in color like dew-silvered clover. Yet the pine cone gall is the result of disease due to the sting of an insect and the derangement of plant cells. . . . Nature has many such unguessed at intentions.

It is possible, however, that a good deal of narcotized writing has seemed beautiful because its motivating power was not understood. Certain types of insanity have from time immemorial been stamped as divine inspiration, and so worshipped,—for example, take epilepsy. Temporary mental disease is not creative inspiration. The creative instinct of the mind is as normal and as much a part of the expression of life as the physical creative instinct. It is true that conditions of health and disease mentally often merge

into one another in a way that is bewildering. In the life of nature disease consumes even as in ours. Mentally, what does this mean in human experience? What is disease? Is it natural? That which takes away from the energy of the individual or the community is evil; that which adds to it is good. But in individual cases, which does add more to the energy of the community, genius with some of its roots all too frequently embedded in disease, or perfect health without the genius? A dark problem and a bitter battleground! The taint of disease has for all except the pathologist and the psychoanalyst the lure of the mysterious and is identified too frequently with greatness which in itself it is not, although it may be correlated with greatness. Those who worship these gods in poetry and prose without taking thought, are no further advanced in the social development of an art than the primitive tribe worshipping awestruck before an epileptic chief can be said to be advanced in religious experience.

In any event, the nearer disease and death press on a sensitive mind, perhaps all the more passionately does that mind press towards the consolation of art which is immortal. It was for his singer's heart Thomson cared the most. And this was his tragedy rather than anything more personal or sentimental. Even as he was tortured he sang: it is the old fable forever new, for James Thomson belonged to the class of human beings who seem to rush from wreck to wreck of their own making and who in the process of destroying themselves gain creatively a sort of inexplicable superpower.

Towards the close of the year 1881 came a strange Indian summer of love and joy. It is curious that Thomson, very near the end of his physical endurance, exhausted and battered mentally and spiritually, could still give sympathy with so fine and sensitive a grace to others, and still find beauty and still want love as never before! It points undeniably to the inner constancy of the poor tragic heart, the nature that was his. . . . No one will ever know even half the agony of that struggle between the dominant, seen traits of James Thomson's nature and those which were hidden. His account was terrible beyond words to describe or figures to enumerate. Perhaps this is one reason why human forgiveness, mercy, kindness, love, facing the inexorable accounts of nature, seem to us so precious. He endured to the

full the horror of one who reaches a stage where there is no longer the possession of any self he would have projected into any future whatsoever!

James Thomson's greatest poems are signposts on that Via Crucis which the most sensitive, the most gifted, have all too often travelled. And we watch again and again the gifted, the beautiful, perish miserably, for want of a little comfort, a few necessities, back against the wall, feet in the gutter. It is not civilization that permits such tragedies, it is brute society vastly more concerned about its material possessions than about human sufferings or the sources of its intellectual and spiritual treasure. This genius by which men warm themselves and help soul and body, do they owe it nothing? Would they thus treat the Host of any other Inn? If they have taken, shall they not give?—at least pay something for what they take? Even as I ask this question, I see him in the squalor of those London streets which were the only couch he knew in the last days of his life, without a sixpence to his name, without shoes for his feet, ragged, starving. Thomson had no vices—not even any faults—he was always gentle, always spirited, even up almost to the last moment, with dogged persistence trying to find some footing somewhere, always generous, always sensitive, but he was a dipsomaniac and at the mercy of disease. It is a poorly organized society that will take no steps to safeguard its best from such disaster. Who is that Shylock who would knowingly and willingly purchase a great poem at the price of such tragedy to a fellow human being?

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